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THE BEAUTY SPOT
DE MUSSET

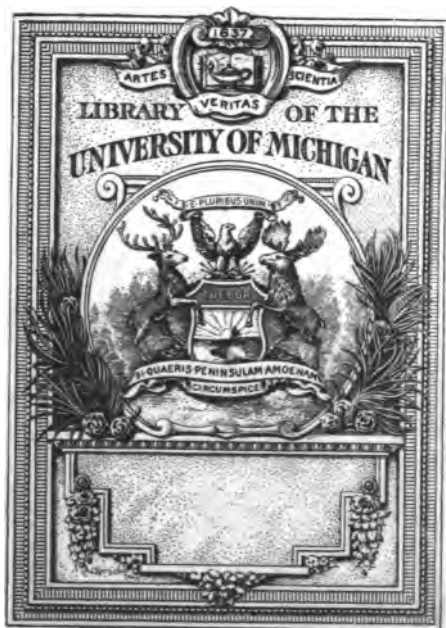
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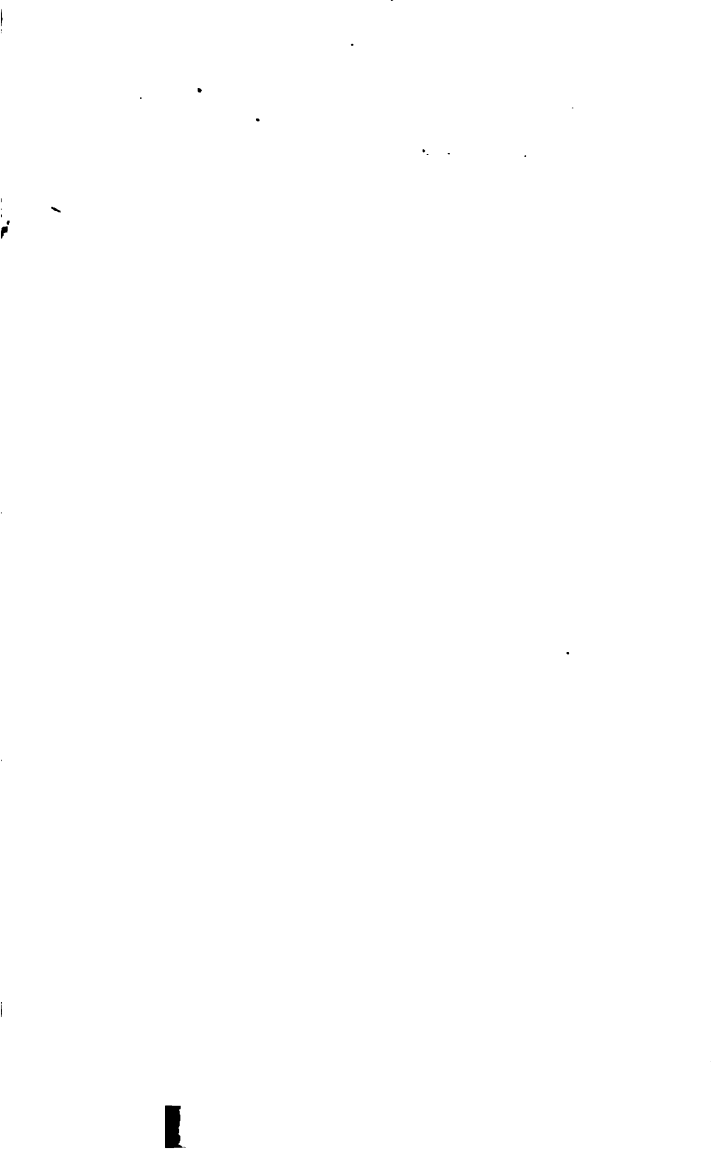


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The Beauty-Spot



The Beauty-Spot

By
Alfred De Musset



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THE BEAUTY-SPOT

I

IN 1756, when Louis XV., wearied with the quarrels between the magistrature and the grand council, about the "two sous tax,"* determined upon holding a special *lit de justice*, the members of Parliament resigned. Sixteen of these resignations were accepted, and as many exiles decreed. "But," said Madame de Pompadour to one of the presidents, "could you calmly stand by and see a handful of men resist the authority of the King of France? Would you not have a very bad opinion of such a policy? Throw off the cloak of petty pretence, M. le President, and you will see the situation just as I see it myself."

It was not only the exiles that had to pay

* Two sous per livre from the tenth of the revenue.

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the penalty of their want of compliance, but also their relatives and friends. The violation of mail-secrets was one of the King's amusements. To relieve the monotony of his other pleasures, it pleased him to hear his favorite read all the curious things that were to be found in his subjects' private correspondence. Of course, under the fallacious pretext of doing his own detective work, he reaped a large harvest of enjoyment from the thousand little intrigues which thus passed under his eyes ; but whoever was connected, whether closely or in a remote degree, with the leaders of the factions, was almost invariably ruined.

Every one knows that Louis XV., with all his manifold weaknesses, had one, and only one, strong point:—he was inexorable.

One evening, as he sat before the fire with his feet on the mantelpiece, melancholy as was his wont, the Marquise, looking through a packet of letters, suddenly burst into a laugh and shrugged her shoulders. The King wished to know what was the matter.

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"Why, I have found here," answered she, "a letter, without a grain of common sense in it, but a very touching thing, for all that, —quite pitiable, in fact."

"Whose is the signature?" said the King.

"There is none, it is a love-letter."

"And what is the address?"

"That is just the point. It is addressed to Mademoiselle d'Annebault, the niece of my good friend, Madame d'Estrades. Apparently it has been put in among these papers on purpose for me to see."

"And what is there in it?" the King persisted.

"Why, I tell you it is all about love. There is mention also of Vauvert and of Neauflette. Are there any gentlemen in those parts? Does your Majesty know of any?"

The King always prided himself upon knowing France by heart, that is, the nobility of France. The etiquette of his court, which he had studied thoroughly, was not more familiar to him than the armorial bear-

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ings of his realm. Not a very wide range of learning ; still nothing beyond it did he reckon worthy the study ; and it was a point of vanity with him, the social hierarchy being, in his eyes, something like the marble staircase of his palace ; he must set foot on it as sole lord and master. After having pondered a few moments, he knitted his brow, as though struck by an unwelcome remembrance ; then, with a sign to the Marquise to read, he threw himself back in his easy-chair, saying with a smile :

“Read on,—she is a pretty girl.”

Madame de Pompadour assumed her sweetest tone of raillery and began to read a long letter, which, from beginning to end, was one rhapsody of love.

“Just see,” said the writer, “how the fates persecute me! At first everything seemed to work for the fulfilment of my wishes, and you yourself, my sweet one, had you not given me reason to hope for happiness? I must, however, renounce this heavenly dream, and that for no fault of mine.

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Is it not an excess of cruelty to have let me catch a glimpse of paradise, only to dash me into the abyss? When some unfortunate wretch is doomed to death, do they take a barbarous pleasure in placing before his eyes all that would make him love life and regret leaving it? Such is, however, my fate: I have no other refuge, no other hope, than the tomb, for, in my dire misfortune, I can no longer dream of winning your hand. When fate smiled on me, all my hopes were that you should be mine; to-day, a poor man, I should abhor myself if I dared still to think of such blessedness, and, now that I can no longer make you happy, though dying of love for you, I forbid you to love me—”

The Marquise smiled at these last words.

“Madame,” said the King, “this is an honorable man. But what prevents him from marrying his lady-love?”

“Permit me, sire, to continue.”

“—This overwhelming injustice from the best of kings, surprises me. You know that my father asked for me a commission as cor-

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net or ensign in the Guards, and that on this appointment depended the happiness of my life, since it would give me the right to offer myself to you. The Duc de Biron proposed my name; but the King rejected me in a manner the memory of which is very bitter to me. If my father has his own way of looking at things (admitting that it is a wrong one) must I suffer for it? My devotion to the King is as true, as unbounded, as my love for you. How gladly would I give proof of both these sentiments, could I but draw the sword! Assuredly I feel deeply distressed at my request being refused; but that I should be thus disgraced without good reason is a thing opposed to the well-known kindness of his Majesty."

"Aha!" said the King, "I am becoming interested."

"—If you knew how very dull we are! Ah! my friend! This estate of Neauflette, this country-house of Vauvert, these wooded glades!—I wander about them all day long. I have forbidden a rake to be used; the

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sacrilegious gardener came yesterday with his iron-shod besom. He was about to touch the sand. But the trace of your steps, lighter than the wind, was not effaced. The prints of your little feet and of your red satin heels were still upon the path; they seemed to walk before me, as I followed your beautiful image, and that charming phantom took shape at times as though it were treading in the fugitive prints. It was there, while conversing with you by the flower-beds, that it was granted me to know you, to appreciate you. A brilliant education joined to the spirit of an angel, the dignity of a queen with the grace of a nymph, thoughts worthy of Leibnitz expressed in language so simple, Plato's bee on the lips of Diana, all this enfolded me as in a veil of adoration. And, during those delicious moments, the darling flowers were blooming about us, I inhaled their breath whilst listening to you, in their perfume your memory lived. They droop their heads now; they present to me the semblance of death!"

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"This is all Rousseau and water," said the King. "Why do you read such stuff to me?"

"Because your Majesty commanded me to do so, for the sake of Mademoiselle d'Annebault's beautiful eyes."

"It is true, she has beautiful eyes."

"—And when I return from these walks, I find my father alone, in the great drawing-room, near the lighted candle, leaning on his elbow, amidst the faded gildings which cover our mouldy wainscot. It is with pain that he sees me enter. My grief disturbs his. Athénaïs! At the back of that drawing-room, near the window, is the harpsichord over which flitted those sweet fingers that my lips have touched but once,—once, while yours opened softly to harmonies of celestial music,—opened with such dainty art that your songs were but a smile. How happy are they,—Rameau, Lulli, Duni, and so many more! Yes, yes, you love them,—they are in your memory,—their breath has passed through your lips. I too seat myself at that harpsichord, I strive to play one of those airs

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that you love;—how cold, how monotonous they seem to me ! I leave them and listen to their dying accents while the echo loses itself beneath that lugubrious vault. My father turns to me and sees me distressed,—what can he do ? Some boudoir gossip, some report from the servants' hall has closed upon us the gates that lead into the world. He sees me young, ardent, full of life, asking only to live in this world, he is my father, and can do nothing for me."

"One would think," said the King, "that this fellow was starting for the hunt, and that his falcon had been killed on his wrist. Against whom is he inveighing, may I ask ?"

"—It is quite true," continued the Marquise, reading in a lower tone, "It is quite true that we are near neighbors, and distant relatives, of the Abbé Chauvelin. . . ."

"That is what it is, is it ?" said Louis XV., yawning. "Another nephew of the *enquêtes et requêtes*. My Parliament abuses my bounty; it really has too large a family."

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“But if it is only a *distant* relative!”

“Enough; all these people are good for nothing. This Abbé Chauvelin is a Jansenist; not a bad sort of fellow, in his way; but he has dared to resign. Please, throw the letter into the fire, and let me hear no more about it.”

II

If these last words of the King were not exactly a death-warrant, they were something like a refusal of permission to live. What could a young man without fortune do, in 1756, whose King would not hear his name mentioned? He might have looked for a clerkship, or tried to turn philosopher, or poet, perhaps; but without official dedication, the trade was worth nothing.

And besides, such was not, by any means, the vocation of the Chevalier Vauvert, who had written, with tears, the letter which made the King laugh. At this very moment, alone with his father, in the old château of Neu-

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flette, his look was desperate and gloomy, even to frenzy, as he paced to and fro.

"I must go to Versailles," he said.

"And what will you do there?"

"I know not; but what am I doing here?"

"You keep me company. It certainly cannot be very amusing for you, and I will not in any way seek to detain you. But do you forget that your mother is dead?"

"No, sir. I promised her to consecrate to you the life that you gave me. I will come back, but I must go. I really cannot stay in this place any longer."

"And why, if I may ask?"

"My desperate love is the only reason. I love Mademoiselle d'Annebault madly."

"But you know that it is useless. It is only Molière who contrives successful matches without dowries. Do you forget too the disfavor with which I am regarded?"

"Ah! sir, that disfavor! Might I be allowed, without deviating from the profound respect I owe you, to ask what caused it?"

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We do not belong to the Parliament. We pay the tax ; we do not order it. If the Parliament stints the King's purse, it is his affair, not ours. Why should M. l'Abbé Chauvelin drag us into his ruin ?”

“Monsieur l'Abbé Chauvelin acts as an honest man. He refuses to approve the ‘dixième’ tax because he is disgusted at the prodigality of the court. Nothing of this kind would have taken place in the days of Madame de Chateauroux ! She was beautiful, at least, that woman, and did not cost us anything, not even what she so generously gave. She was sovereign mistress, and declared that she would be satisfied if the King did not send her to rot in some dungeon when he should be pleased to withdraw his good graces from her. But this Étioles, this le Normand, this insatiable Poisson !”

“What does it matter ?”

“What does it matter ! say you ? More than you think. Do you know that now, at this very time, while the King is plundering us, the fortune of this *grisette* is incalcu-

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lable? She began by contriving to get an annuity of a hundred and eighty thousand livres—but that was a mere bagatelle, it counts for nothing now; you can form no idea of the startling sums that the King showers upon her; three months of the year cannot pass without her picking up, as though by chance, some five or six hundred thousand livres—yesterday out of the salt-tax, to-day out of the increase in the appropriation for the Royal mews. Although she has her own quarters in the royal residences, she buys la Selle, Cressy, Aulnay, Brimborion, Marigny, Saint-Remy, Bellevue, and a number of other estates,—mansions in Paris, in Fontainebleau, Versailles, Compiègne,—without counting secret hoards in all the banks of Europe, to be used in case of her own disgrace or a demise of the crown. And who pays for all this, if you please?”

“That I do not know, sir, but, certainly, not I.”

“It is you, as well as everybody else. It is France, it is the people who toil and moil,

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who riot in the streets, who insult the statue of Pigalle. But Parliament will endure it no longer, it will have no more new imposts. As long as there was question of defraying the cost of the war, our last crown was ready ; we had no thought of bargaining. The victorious King could see clearly that he was beloved by the whole kingdom, still more so when he was at the point of death. Then all dissensions, all faction, all ill-feeling ceased. All France knelt before the sick-bed of the King, and prayed for him. But if we pay, without counting, for his soldiers and his doctors, we will no longer pay for his mistresses ; we have other things to do with our money than to support Madame de Pompadour."

"I do not defend her, sir. I could not pretend to say either that she was in the wrong or in the right. I have never seen her."

"Doubtless ; and you would not be sorry to see her,—is it not so ?—in order to have an opinion on the subject ? For, at your

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age, the head judges through the eyes. Try it then, if the fancy takes you. But the satisfaction will be denied you."

"Why, sir?"

"Because such an attempt is pure folly; because this Marquise is as invisible in her little boudoir at Brimboration as the Grand Turk in his seraglio; because every door will be shut in your face. What are you going to do? Attempt an impossibility? Court fortune like an adventurer?"

"By no means, but like a lover. I do not intend to supplicate, sir, but to protest against an injustice. I had a well-founded hope, almost a promise, from M. de Biron; I was on the eve of possessing the object of my love, and this love is not unreasonable; you have not disapproved of it. Let me venture, then, to plead my own cause. Whether I shall appeal to the King or to Madame de Pompadour I know not, but I wish to set out."

"You do not know what the court is, and you wish to present yourself there."

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"I may perhaps be the more easily received for the very reason that I am unknown there."

"You unknown, Chevalier! What are you thinking about? With such a name as yours! We are gentlemen of an old stock, Monsieur; you could not be unknown."

"Well, then, the King will listen to me."

"He will not even hear you. You see Versailles in your dreams, and you will think yourself there when your postilion stops his horses at the city gates. Suppose you get as far as the antechamber,—the gallery, the Œil-de-Bœuf; perhaps there may be nothing between his Majesty and yourself but the thickness of a door; there will still be an abyss for you to cross. You will look about you, you will seek expedients, protection, and you will find nothing. We are relatives of M. de Chauvelin, and how do you think the King takes vengeance on such as we? The rack for Damiens, exile for the Parliament, but for us a word is enough, or, worse still,—silence. Do you

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know what the silence of the King is, when, instead of replying to you, he mutely stares at you, as he passes, and annihilates you? After the Grève, and the Bastille, this is a degree of torture which, though less cruel in appearance, leaves its mark as plainly as the hand of the executioner. The condemned man, it is true, remains free, but he must no longer think of approaching woman or courtier, drawing-room, abbey, or barrack. As he moves about every door closes upon him, every one who is anybody turns away, and thus he walks this way and that, in an invisible prison."

"But I will so bestir myself in my prison that I shall get out of it."

"No more than any one else! The son of M. de Meynières was no more to blame than you. Like you, he had received promises, he entertained most legitimate hopes. His father, a devoted subject of his Majesty, an upright man if there is one in the kingdom, repulsed by his sovereign, bowed his gray head before the *grisette*, not in prayer, but

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in ardent pleading. Do you know what she replied? Here are her very words, which M. de Meynières sends me in a letter,—‘The King is the master, he does not deem it appropriate to signify his displeasure to you personally; he is content to make you aware of it by depriving your son of a calling. To punish you otherwise would be to begin an unpleasantness, and he wishes for none; we must respect his will. I pity you, however, I realize your troubles. I have been a mother; I know what it must cost you to leave your son without a profession!’ This is how the creature expresses herself; and you wish to put yourself at her feet!”

“They say they are charming, sir.”

“Of course they say so. She is not pretty, and the King does not love her, as every one knows. He yields, he bends before this woman. She *must* have something else than that wooden head of hers to maintain her strange power.”

“But they say she has so much wit.”

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"And no heart !—Much to her credit, no doubt."

"No heart! She who knows so well how to declaim the lines of Voltaire, how to sing the music of Rousseau! She who plays Alzire and Colette! No heart! Oh, that cannot be! I will never believe it."

"Go then and see, since you wish it. I advise, I do not command, but you will only be at the expense of a useless journey.—You love this d'Annebault young lady very much then?"

"More than my life."

"*Alors*, be off!"

III

It has been said that journeys injure love, because they distract the mind; it has also been said that they strengthen love, because they give one time to dream over it. The Chevalier was too young to make such nice distinctions. Weary of the carriage, when half-way on his journey, he had taken a sad-

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dle-back and thus arrived towards five o'clock in the evening at the "Sun" Inn—a sign then out of fashion, since it dated back to the time of Louis XIV.

There was, at Versailles, an old priest who had been rector of a church near Neauflette; the Chevalier knew him and loved him. This curé, poor and simple himself, had a nephew, who held a benefice, a court abbé, who might therefore be useful. So the Chevalier went to this nephew, who—man of importance as he was,—his chin ensconced in his "rabat," received the new-comer civilly, and condescended to listen to his request.

"Come!" said he, "you arrive at a fortunate moment. This is to be an opera-night at the court, some sort of fête or other. I am not going, because I am sulking so as to get something out of the Marquise; but here I happen to have a note from the Duc d'Aumont; I asked for it for some one else, but never mind, you can have it. Go to the fête; you have not yet been presented, it is

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true, but, for this entertainment, that is not necessary. Try to be in the King's way when he goes into the little *foyer*. One look, and your fortune is made."

The Chevalier thanked the abbé, and, worn out by a disturbed night and a day on horseback, he made his toilet at the inn in that negligent manner which so well becomes a lover. A maid-servant, whose experience had been decidedly limited, dressed his wig as best she could, covering his spangled coat with powder. Thus he turned his steps towards his luck with the hopeful courage of twenty summers.

The night was falling when he arrived at the château. He timidly advanced to the gate and asked his way of a sentry. He was shown the grand staircase. There, he was informed by the tall Swiss that the opera had just commenced, and that the King, that is to say, everybody, was in the hall.*

* This does not refer to the present theatre, built by Louis XV., or rather by Madame de Pompadour, but only completed in 1769 and inaugurated in 1770, for the marriage of

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"If Monsieur le Marquis will cross the court," added the doorkeeper (he conferred the title of "Marquis" at a venture), "he will be at the play in an instant. If he prefers to go through the apartments——"

The Chevalier was not acquainted with the palace. Curiosity prompted him, at first, to reply that he would cross the apartments; then, as a lackey offered to follow as a guide, an impulse of vanity made him add that he needed no escort. He, therefore, went forward alone, but not without a certain emotion of timidity.

Versailles was resplendent with light. From the ground-floor to the roof there glittered and blazed lustres, chandeliers, gilded furniture, marbles. With the exception of the Queen's apartment, the doors were everywhere thrown open. As the Chevalier walked on he was struck with an as-

the Duc de Berri (Louis XVI.) with Marie Antoinette. The "hall" in question was a sort of portable theatre, that was moved into this or that gallery or apartment, after the manner in vogue in the days of Louis XIV.

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tonishment and an admiration better imagined than described, for the wonder of the spectacle that offered itself to his gaze was not only the beauty, the sparkle of the display itself, but the absolute solitude which surrounded him in this enchanted wilderness.

To find one's self alone in a vast enclosure, be it temple, cloister, or castle, produces a strange, even a weird feeling. The monument—whatever it be—seems to weigh upon the solitary individual ; its walls gaze at him ; its echoes are listening to him ; the noise of his steps breaks in upon a silence so deep that he is impressed by an involuntary fear and dares not advance without a feeling akin to awe. Such were the Chevalier's first impressions, but curiosity soon got the upper hand and drew him on. The candelabra of the Gallery of Mirrors, looking into the polished surfaces, saw their flames redoubled in them. Every one knows what countless thousands of cherubs, nymphs, and shepherdesses disport themselves on the panellings, flutter about on the ceilings, and seem to

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encircle the entire palace as with an immense garland. Here, vast halls, with canopies of velvet shot with gold and chairs of state still impressed with the stiff majesty of the "great King"; there, creased and disordered ottomans, chairs in confusion around a card-table; a never-ending succession of empty salons, where all this magnificence shone out the more that it seemed entirely useless. At intervals were half-concealed doors opening upon corridors that extended as far as the eye could reach, a thousand staircases, a thousand passages crossing each other as in a labyrinth; colonnades, raised platforms built for giants, boudoirs ensconced in corners like children's hiding-places, an enormous painting of Vanloo near a mantel of porphyry; a forgotten patch-box, lying beside a piece of grotesque Chinese workmanship; here a crushing grandeur, there an effeminate grace; and everywhere, in the midst of luxury, of prodigality, and of indolence, a thousand intoxicating odors, strange and diverse, mingled perfumes of

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flowers and women, an enervating warmth, the very material and sensible atmosphere of pleasure itself.

To be in such a place, amid such marvels, at twenty, and to be there alone, is surely quite sufficient cause for temporary intoxication. The Chevalier advanced at hap-hazard, as in a dream.

“A very palace of fairies,” he murmured, and, indeed, he seemed to behold, unfolding itself before him, one of those tales in which wandering knights discover enchanted castles. Were they indeed mortal creatures that inhabited this matchless abode? Were they real women who came and sat on these chairs and whose graceful outlines had left on those cushions that slight impress, so suggestive, even yet, of indolence? Who knows but that, behind those thick curtains, at the end of some long dazzling gallery, there may perhaps soon appear a princess asleep for the last hundred years, a fairy in hoops, an Armida in spangles, or some court hamadryad that shall issue forth from this

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marble column, or burst from out of that gilded panel ?

Bewildered, almost overpowered, at the sight of all these novel objects, the young Chevalier, in order the better to indulge his reverie, had thrown himself on a sofa, and would doubtless have forgotten himself there for some time had he not remembered that he was in love. What, at this hour, was Mademoiselle d'Annebault, his beloved, doing—left behind in her old château ?

“Athénaïs !” he exclaimed suddenly. “Why do I thus waste my time here ? Is my mind wandering ? Great heavens ! Where am I ? And what is going on within me ?”

He soon rose and continued his travels through this *terra incognita*, and of course lost his way. Two or three lackeys, speaking in a low voice, stood before him at the end of a gallery. He walked towards them and asked how he should find his way to the play.

“If M. le Marquis,” he was answered (the same title being still benevolently granted

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him) "will give himself the trouble to go down that staircase and follow the gallery on the right, he will find at the end of it three steps going up ; he will then turn to the left, go through the Diana salon, that of Apollo, that of the Muses, and that of Spring ; he will go down six steps more, then, leaving the Guards' Hall on his right and crossing over to the Ministers' staircase, he will not fail to meet there other ushers who will show him the way."

"Much obliged," said the Chevalier, "with such excellent instruction, it will certainly be my fault if I do not find my way."

He set off again boldly, constantly stopping, however, in spite of himself, to look from side to side, then once more remembering his love. At last, at the end of a full quarter of an hour, he once more found, as he had been told, a group of lackeys.

"M. le Marquis is mistaken," they informed him ; "it is through the other wing of the château that he should have gone, but nothing is easier for him than to retrace his

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steps. M. le Marquis has but to go down this staircase, then he will cross the salon of the Nymphs, that of Summer, that of——”

“I thank you,” said the chevalier, proceeding on his way. “How foolish I am,” he thought, “to go on asking people in this fashion like a rustic. I am making myself ridiculous to no purpose, and even supposing—though it is not likely—that they are not laughing at me, of what use is their list of names, and the pompous sobriquets of these salons, not one of which I know?”

He made up his mind to go straight before him as far as possible. “For, after all,” said he to himself, “this palace is very beautiful and prodigiously vast, but it is not boundless, and, were it three times as large as our rabbit-enclosure, I must at last reach the end of it.”

But it is not easy in Versailles to walk on for a long time in one direction, and this rustic comparison of the royal dwelling to a rabbit-enclosure doubtless displeased the nymphs of the place, for they at once set

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about leading the poor lover astray more than ever, and, doubtless, to punish him, took pleasure in making him retrace his steps over and over again, constantly bringing him back to the same place, like a countryman lost in a thicket of quickset ; thus did they shut him in in this Cretan labyrinth of marble and gold.

In the "Antiquities of Rome," by Piranesi, there is a series of engravings which the artist calls "his dreams," and which are supposed to reproduce his own visions during a fit of delirious fever. These engravings represent vast Gothic halls ; on the flagstones are strewn all sorts of engines and machines, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, the expression of enormous power and formidable resistance. Along the walls you perceive a staircase, and upon this staircase, climbing, not without trouble, Piranesi himself. Follow the steps a little higher and they suddenly come to an end before an abyss. Whatever has happened to poor Piranesi, you think that he has, at any rate,

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reached the end of his labors, for he cannot take another step without falling; but lift your eyes and you will see a second staircase rising in the air, and upon these stairs Piranesi again, again on the brink of a precipice.

Look now still higher, and another staircase still rises before you, and again poor Piranesi continuing his ascent, and so on, until the everlasting staircase and the everlasting Piranesi disappear together in the skies; that is to say, in the border of the engraving.

This allegory, offspring of a nightmare, represents with a high degree of accuracy the tedium of useless labor and the species of vertigo which is brought on by impatience. The chevalier, wandering incessantly from salon to salon and from gallery to gallery, was at last seized with a fit of downright exasperation.

"Parbleu," said he, "but this is cruel! After having been so charmed, so enraptured, so enthralled, to find myself alone in this cursed palace." (It was no longer a

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palace of fairies!) "I shall never be able to get out of it! A plague upon the infatuation which inspired me with the idea of entering this place, like Prince Fortunatus with his boots of solid gold, instead of simply getting the first lackey I came across to take me to the play at once!"

The Chevalier experienced this tardy feeling of repentance for his rashness at a moment when, like Piranesi, he was half-way up a staircase, on a landing between three doors. Behind the middle one, he thought he heard a murmur so sweet, so light, so voluptuous, that he could not help listening. At the very instant when he was tremblingly advancing with the indiscreet intention of eavesdropping, this door swung open. A breath of air, balmy with a thousand perfumes, a torrent of light that rendered the very mirrors of the gallery lustreless struck him so suddenly that he perforce stepped back.

"Does Monsieur le Marquis wish to enter?" asked the usher who had opened the door.

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"I wish to go to the play," replied the Chevalier.

"It is just this moment over."

At the same time, a bevy of beautiful ladies, their complexions delicately tinted with white and carmine, escorted by lords, old and young, who led them, not by the arm, nor even by the hand, but by the tips of their fingers, began filing out from the Palace Theatre, taking great care to walk sideways, in order not to disarrange their hoops.

All of these brilliant people spoke in a low voice, with an air half grave, half gay, a mixture of awe and respect.

"What can this be?" said the Chevalier, not guessing that chance had luckily brought him to the little *foyer*.

"The King is about to pass," replied the usher.

There is a kind of intrepidity which hesitates at nothing ; it comes but too easily, it is the courage of vulgar people. Our young provincial, although he was reasonably

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brave, did not possess this faculty. At the mere words, "The King is about to pass," he stood motionless and almost terror-stricken.

King Louis XV., who when out hunting would ride on horseback a dozen leagues with ease, was, in other respects, as is known, royally indolent. He boasted, not without reason, that he was the first gentleman of France, and his mistresses used to tell him, not without truth, that he was the best built and the most handsome. It was something to remember to see him leave his chair, and deign to walk in person. When he crossed the *foyer*, with one arm laid, or rather stretched, on the shoulder of Monsieur d'Argenson, while his red heel glided over the polished floor (he had made his laziness the fashion) all whisperings ceased; the courtiers lowered their heads, not daring to bow outright, and the fine ladies, gently bending their knees within the depths of their immense furbelows, ventured that coquettish good-night which our grandmothers called a curtsey, and which our century has re-

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placed by the brutal English shake of the hand.

But the King paid attention to nothing, and saw only what pleased him. Alfieri, perhaps, was there, and it is he who thus describes, in his memoirs, his presentation at Versailles :

"I well knew that the King never spoke to strangers who were not of striking appearance; all the same I could not brook the impassible and frowning demeanor of Louis XV. He scanned from head to foot the man who was being presented to him, and it looked as if he received no impression by so doing. It seems to me, however, that if one were to say to a giant, 'Here is an ant I present to you,' he would smile on looking at it, or perhaps say, 'Oh! what a little creature.'"

The taciturn monarch thus passed among these flowers of feminine loveliness, and all this court, alone in spite of the crowd. It did not require of the Chevalier much reflection to understand that he had nothing to

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hope from the King, and that the recital of his love would obtain no success in that quarter.

“Unfortunate that I am!” thought he. “My father was but too well informed when he told me that within two steps of the King I should see an abyss between him and me. Were I to venture to ask for an audience, who would be my patron? Who would present me? There he is,—the absolute master, who can by a word change my destiny, assure my fortune, fulfil my desires. He is there before me; were I to stretch out my hand I could touch his embroidered coat—and I feel myself further from him than if I were still buried in the depths of my native province! Oh! If I could only speak to him! Only approach him! Who will come to my help?”

While the Chevalier was in this unhappy state of mind he saw entering with an air of the utmost grace and delicacy a young and attractive woman, clad very simply in a white gown, without diamonds or embroideries and

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with a single rose in her hair. She gave her hand to a lord *tout à l'ombre*, as Voltaire expresses it, and spoke softly to him behind her fan. Now chance willed it that, in chatting, laughing, and gesticulating, this fan should slip from her and fall beneath a chair, immediately in front of the Chevalier. He at once hurried to pick it up, and as in doing so he had set one knee on the floor, the young lady appeared to him so charming that he presented her the fan without rising. She stopped, smiled and passed on, thanking him with a slight movement of the head, but at the look she had given the Chevalier he felt his heart beat without knowing why. He was right. This young lady was *la petite d'Étioles*, as the malcontents still called her, while others in speaking of her said "la Marquise" in the reverent tone in which one says "The Queen."

IV

"SHE will protect me! She will come to my rescue! Ah! how truly the abbé spoke

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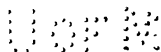
when he said that one look might decide my life. Yes, those eyes, so soft and gentle, that little mouth, both merry and sweet, that little foot almost hidden under the *pompon*—Yes, here is my good fairy!”

Thus thought the Chevalier, almost aloud, as he returned to the inn. Whence came this sudden hope? Did his youth alone speak, or had the eyes of the Marquise told a tale?

He passed the greater part of the night writing to Mademoiselle d'Annebault such a letter as we heard read by Madame de Pompadour to her lord.

To reproduce this letter would be a vain task. Excepting idiots, lovers alone find no monotony in repeating the same thing over and over again.

At daybreak the Chevalier went out and began roaming about, carrying his dreams through the streets. It did not occur to him to have recourse once more to the protecting abbé, and it would not be easy to tell the reason which prevented his doing so. It was



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like a blending of timidity and audacity, of false shame and romantic honor. And, indeed, what would the abbé have replied to him, if he had told his story of the night before? "You had the unique good fortune to pick up this fan; did you know how to profit by it? What did the Marquise say to you?"

"Nothing."

"You should have spoken to her."

"I was confused; I had lost my head."

"That was wrong; one must know how to seize an opportunity; but this can be repaired. Would you like me to present you to Monsieur So-and-so, one of my friends; or perhaps to Madame Such-a-one? That would be still better. We will try and secure for you access to this Marquise who frightened you so, and then,"—and so forth.

Now the Chevalier little relished anything of this kind. It seemed to him that, in telling his adventure, he would, so to speak, soil and mar it. He said to himself that chance had done for him something unheard

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of, incredible, and that it should remain a secret between himself and Fortune. To confide this secret to the first comer was, to his thinking, to rob it of its value, and to show himself unworthy of it. "I went alone yesterday to the castle at Versailles," thought he, "I can surely go alone to Trianon?" This was, at the time, the abode of the favorite.

Such a way of thinking might, and even should, appear extravagant to calculating minds, who neglect no detail, and leave as little as possible to chance; but colder mortals, if they were ever young, and not everybody is so, even in youth, have known that strange sentiment, both weak and bold, dangerous and seductive, which drags us to our fate. One feels one's self blind, and wishes to be so; one does not know where one is going and yet walks on. The charm of the thing consists in this recklessness and this very ignorance; it is the pleasure of the artist in his dreams, of the lover spending the night beneath the windows of his mis-

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tress; it is the instinct of the soldier; it is, above all, that of the gamester.

The Chevalier, almost without knowing it, had thus taken his way to Trianon. Without being very *paré*, as they said in those days, he lacked neither elegance nor that indescribable air which forbids a chance lackey, meeting one, from daring to ask where one is going. It was, therefore, not difficult for him, thanks to information he had obtained at the inn, to reach the gate of the château,—if one can so call that marble *bonbonnière*, which has seen so many pleasures and pains in by-gone days. Unfortunately, the gate was closed, and a stout Swiss wearing a plain coat was walking about, his hands behind his back, in the inner avenue, like a person who is not expecting any one.

“The King is here!” said the Chevalier to himself, “or else the Marquise is away. Evidently, when the doors are closed, and valets stroll about, the masters are either shut in or gone out.”

What was to be done? Full as he had

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been, a moment earlier, of courage and confidence, he now felt, all at once, confused and disappointed. The mere thought, "The King here!" alone gave him more alarm than those few words, on the night before: "The King is about to pass!" For then he was but facing the unknown, and now he knew that icy stare, that implacable, impassible majesty.

"Ah! Bon Dieu! What a figure I should cut if I were to be so mad as to try and penetrate this garden, and find myself face to face with this superb monarch, sipping his coffee beside a rivulet."

At once the sinister shadow of the Bastille seemed to fall before the poor lover; instead of the charming image that he had retained of the Marquise and her smile, he saw dungeons, cells, black bread, questionable water; he knew the story of Latude, thirty years an inmate of the Bastille. Little by little his hope seemed to be taking to itself wings.

"And yet," he again said to himself, "I

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am doing no harm, nor the King either. I protest against an injustice ; but I never wrote or sang scurrilous songs. I was so well received at Versailles yesterday, and the lackeys were so polite ! What am I afraid of ? Of committing a blunder ? I shall make many more which will repair this one."

He approached the gate and touched it with his finger. It was not quite closed. He opened it, and resolutely entered.

The gatekeeper turned round with a look of annoyance.

"What are you looking for ? Where are you going ?"

"I am going to Madame de Pompadour."

"Have you an audience ?"

"Yes."

"Where is your letter ?"

He was no longer the "Marquis" of the night before, and, this time, there was no Duc d'Aumont. The Chevalier lowered his eyes sadly, and noticed that his white stockings and Rhinestone buckles were covered

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with dust. He had made the mistake of coming on foot, in a region where no one walked. The gatekeeper also bent his eyes, and scanned him, not from head to foot, but from foot to head. The dress seemed neat enough, but the hat was rather askew, and the hair lacked powder.

"You have no letter. What do you wish?"

"I wish to speak to Madame de Pompadour."

"Really! And you think this is the way it is done?"

"I know nothing about it. Is the King here?"

"Perhaps. Go about your business and leave me alone."

The Chevalier did not wish to lose his temper, but, in spite of himself, this insolence made him turn pale.

"I sometimes have told a lackey to go away," he replied, "but a lackey never said so to me."

"Lackey! I a lackey?" exclaimed the enraged gatekeeper.

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"Lackey, doorkeeper, valet, or menial, I care not, and it matters little."

The gatekeeper made a step toward the Chevalier with clenched fists and face aflame. The Chevalier, brought to himself by the appearance of a threat, lifted the handle of his sword slightly.

"Take care, fellow," said he, "I am a gentleman, and it would cost me but thirty-six livres to put a boor like you under ground."

"If you are a nobleman, monsieur, I belong to the King; I am only doing my duty; so do not think——"

At this moment the flourish of a hunting-horn sounding from the Bois de Satory was heard afar, and lost itself in the echo. The Chevalier allowed his sword to drop into its scabbard, no longer thinking of the interrupted quarrel.

"I declare," said he, "it is the King starting for the hunt! Why did you not tell me that before?"

"That has nothing to do with me, nor with you either."

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"Listen to me, my good man. The King is not here ; I have no letter, I have no audience. Here is some money for you ; let me in."

He drew from his pocket several pieces of gold. The gatekeeper scanned him anew with a superb contempt.

"What is that ?" said he, disdainfully. "Is it thus you seek to penetrate into a royal dwelling ? Instead of making you go out, take care I don't lock you in."

"*You*,—you valet!" said the Chevalier, getting angry again and once more seizing his sword.

"Yes, I," repeated the big man. But during this conversation, in which the historian regrets to have compromised his hero, thick clouds had darkened the sky ; a storm was brewing. A flash of lightning burst forth, followed by a violent peal of thunder, and the rain began to fall heavily. The Chevalier, who still held his gold, saw a drop of water on his dusty shoe as large as a crown piece.

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"Peste!" said he, "let us find shelter. It would never do to get wet."

He turned nimbly towards the den of Cerberus, or, if you please, the gatekeeper's lodge. Once in there, he threw himself unceremoniously into the big arm-chair of the gatekeeper himself.

"Heavens! How you annoy me!" said he, "and how unfortunate I am! You take me for a conspirator, and you do not understand that I have in my pocket a petition for his Majesty! If I am from the country, you are nothing but a dolt."

The gatekeeper, for answer, went to a corner to fetch his halberd, and remained standing thus with the weapon in his fist.

"When are you going away?" he cried out in a stentorian voice.

The quarrel, in turn forgotten and taken up again, seemed this time to be becoming quite serious, and already the gatekeeper's two big hands trembled strangely on his pike;—what was to happen? I do not know. But, suddenly turning his head,

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—“Ah !” said the Chevalier, “who comes here ?”

A young page mounted on a splendid horse (not an English one ;—at that time thin legs were not the fashion), came up at full speed. The road was soaked with rain ; the gate was but half open. There was a pause ; the keeper advanced and opened the gate. The page spurred his horse, which had stopped for the space of an instant ; it tried to resume its gait, but missed its footing, and, slipping on the damp ground, fell.

It is very awkward, almost dangerous, to raise a fallen horse. A riding-whip is of no use. The kicking of the beast, which is doing its best, is extremely disagreeable, especially when one's own leg is caught under the saddle.

The Chevalier, however, came to the rescue without thinking of these inconveniences, and set about it so cleverly that the horse was soon raised and the rider freed. But the latter was covered with mud and could scarcely limp along.

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Carried as well as might be to the gate-keeper's lodge and seated in his turn in the big arm-chair, "Sir," said he to the chevalier, "you are certainly a nobleman. You have rendered me a great service, but you can render me a still greater one. Here is a message from the King for Madame la Marquise, and this message is very urgent, as you see, since my horse and I, in order to go faster, almost broke our necks. You understand that, wounded as I am, with a lame leg, I could not deliver this paper. I should have, in order to do so, to be carried myself. Will you go there in my stead?"

At the same time he drew from his pocket a large envelope ornamented with gilt arabesques and fastened with the royal seal.

"Very willingly, sir," replied the Chevalier, taking the envelope. And, nimble and light as a feather, he set out at a run and on the tips of his toes.

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V

WHEN the Chevalier arrived at the château he found another doorkeeper in front of the peristyle.

"By the King's order," said the young man, who this time no longer feared halberds, and, showing his letter, he passed gaily between half a dozen lackeys.

A tall usher, planted in the middle of the vestibule, seeing the order and the royal seal, gravely inclined himself, like a poplar bent by the wind,—then, smiling, he touched with one of his bony fingers the corner of a piece of panelling.

A little swinging door, masked by tapestry, at once opened as if of its own accord. The bony man made an obsequious sign, the Chevalier entered, and the tapestry, which had been drawn apart, fell softly behind him.

A silent valet introduced him into a drawing-room, then into a corridor, in which there were two or three closed doors, then at last,

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into a second drawing-room, and begged him to wait a moment.

“Am I here again in the château of Versailles?” the Chevalier asked himself. “Are we going to begin another game of hide-and-seek?”

Trianon was, at that time, neither what it is now nor what it had been. It has been said that Madame de Maintenon had made of Versailles an oratory, and Madame de Pompadour a boudoir. It has also been said of Trianon that *ce petit château de porcelaine* was the boudoir of Madame de Montespan. Be that as it may, concerning these boudoirs, it appears that Louis XV. put them everywhere. This or that gallery, which his ancestor walked majestically, was then divided oddly into an infinity of apartments. There were some of every color, and the King went fluttering about in all these gardens of silk and velvet.

“Do you think my little furnished apartments are in good taste?” he one day asked the beautiful Comtesse de Sérrant.

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"No," said she, "I would have them in blue."

As blue was the King's color, this answer flattered him.

At their next meeting, Madame de Sérrant found the salon upholstered in blue, as she had wished it.

That in which the Chevalier now found himself alone was neither blue nor pink, it was all mirrors. We know how much a pretty woman with a lovely figure gains by letting her image repeat itself in a thousand aspects. She bewilders, she envelops, so to speak, him whom she desires to please. To whatever side he turns, he sees her. How can he avoid being charmed? He must either take to flight or own himself conquered.

The Chevalier looked at the garden, too. There, behind, the bushes and labyrinths, the statues and the marble vases, that pastoral style which the Marquise was about to introduce, and which, later on, Madame Dubarry and Marie Antoinette were to push to such a

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high degree of perfection, was beginning to show itself. Already there appeared the rural fantasies where the *blasé* conceits were disappearing. Already the puffing tritons, the grave goddesses and the learned nymphs, the busts with flowing wigs, frozen with horror in their wealth of verdure, beheld an English garden rise from the ground, amid the wandering trees. Little lawns, little streams, little bridges, were soon to dethrone Olympus to replace it by a dairy,—strange parody of nature, which the English copy without understanding,—very child's play, for the nonce the pastime of an indolent master who tried in vain to escape the ennui of Versailles while remaining at Versailles itself.

But the Chevalier was too charmed, too enraptured at finding himself there for a critical thought to present itself to his mind. He was, on the contrary, ready to admire everything, and was indeed admiring, twirling his missive between his fingers as a rustic does his hat, when a pretty waiting-maid opened the door, and said to him softly:

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"Come, monsieur."

He followed her, and after having once more passed through several corridors which were more or less mysterious, she ushered him into a large apartment where the shutters were half-closed. Here, she stopped and seemed to listen.

"Still at hide-and-seek!" said the Chevalier to himself. However, at the end of a few moments, yet another door opened, and another waiting-maid, who seemed to be even prettier than the first, repeated to him in the same tone the same words:

"Come, monsieur."

If he had been the victim of one kind of emotion at Versailles, he was subject to another, and still deeper feeling now, for he stood on the threshold of the temple in which the divinity dwelt. He advanced with a palpitating heart. A soft light, slightly veiled by thin, gauze curtains, succeeded obscurity; a delicious perfume, almost imperceptible, pervaded the air around him; the waiting-maid timidly drew back the corner of a silk

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portière, and, at the end of a large chamber furnished with elegant simplicity, he beheld the lady of the fan,—the all-powerful Marquise.

She was alone, seated before a table, wrapped in a dressing-gown, her head resting on her hand, and, seemingly, deeply preoccupied. On seeing the Chevalier enter, she rose with a sudden and apparently involuntary movement.

“You come on behalf of the King?”

The Chevalier might have answered, but he could think of nothing better than to bow profoundly while presenting to the Marquise the letter which he brought her. She took it, or rather seized upon it, with extreme eagerness. Her hands trembled on the envelope as she broke the seal.

This letter, written by the King's hand, was rather long. She devoured it at first, so to speak, with a glance, then she read it greedily, with profound attention, with wrinkled brow and tightened lips. She was not beautiful thus, and no longer resembled the

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magic apparition of the petit *foyer*. When she reached the end, she seemed to reflect. Little by little her face, which had turned pale, assumed a faint color (at this hour she did not wear rouge), and not only did she regain that graceful air which habitually belonged to her, but a gleam of real beauty illumined her delicate features; one might have taken her cheeks for two rose-leaves. She heaved a little sigh, allowed the letter to fall upon the table, and, turning towards the Chevalier, said, with the most charming smile:

“I kept you waiting, monsieur, but I was not yet dressed, and, indeed, am hardly so even now. That is why I was forced to get you to come through the private rooms, for I am almost as much besieged here as though I were at home. I would like to answer the King’s note. Would it be too much trouble to you to do an errand for me?”

This time he *must* speak; the Chevalier had had time to regain a little courage:

“Alas ! madame,” said he, sadly, “you

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confer a great favor on me, but, unfortunately, I can not profit by it."

"Why not?"

"I have not the honor to belong to his Majesty."

"How, then, did you come here?"

"By chance; I met on my way a page who had been thrown and who begged me——"

"How 'thrown'?" repeated the Marquise, bursting out laughing. She seemed so happy at this moment, that gaiety came to her without an effort.

"Yes, madame, he fell from his horse at the gate. I luckily found myself there to help him to rise, and, as his dress was very much disordered, he begged me to take charge of his message."

"And by what chance did you find yourself there?"

"Madame, it was because I had a petition to present to his Majesty."

"His Majesty lives at Versailles."

"Yes, but you live here."

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"Oh! So it is you who wished to entrust me with a message."

"Madame, I beg you to believe——"

"Do not trouble yourself, you are not the first. But why do you address yourself to me? I am but a woman—like any other."

As she uttered these words with a somewhat ironical air, the Marquise threw a triumphant look upon the letter she had just read.

"Madame," continued the Chevalier, "I have always heard that men exercise power, and that women——"

"Guide it, eh? Well, monsieur, there is a queen of France."

"I know it, madame; that is how it happened that I found myself *here* this morning."

The Marquise was more than accustomed to such compliments, though they were generally made in a whisper; but, in the present circumstances, this appeared to be quite singularly gratifying to her.

"And on what faith," said she, "on what

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assurance, did you believe yourself able to penetrate as far as this? For you did not count, I suppose, upon a horse's falling on the way."

"Madame, I believed—I hoped——"

"What did you hope?"

"I hoped that chance,—might make——"

"Chance again! Chance is apparently one of your friends; but I warn you that if you have no other, it is a sad recommendation."

Perhaps offended Chance wished to avenge herself for this irreverence, for the Chevalier, whom these few questions had more and more troubled, suddenly perceived, on the corner of the table, the identical fan that he had picked up the night before. He took it, and, as on the night before, presented it to the Marquise, bending the knee before her.

"Here, madame," he said to her, "is the only friend that could plead for me——"

The Marquise seemed at first astonished, and hesitated a moment, looking now at the fan, now at the chevalier.

"Ah! you are right," she said at last, "it

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is you, monsieur! I recognize you. It is you whom I saw yesterday, after the play, as I went by with M. de Richelieu. I let my fan drop, and you 'found yourself there,' as you were saying."

"Yes, madame."

"And very gallantly, as a true chevalier, you returned it to me. I did not thank you, but I was sure, all the same, that he who knows how to pick up a fan with such grace would also know, at the right time, how to pick up the glove. And we are not ill-pleased at that, we women."

"And it is but too true, madame ; for, on reaching here just now, I almost had a duel with the gatekeeper."

"Mercy on us!" said the Marquise, once more seized with a fit of gaiety. "With the gatekeeper! And what about?"

"He would not let me come in."

"That would have been a pity! But who are you, monsieur? And what is your request?"

"Madame, I am called the Chevalier de

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Vauvert. M. de Biron had asked in my behalf for a cornetcy in the Guards."

"Oh! I remember now. You come from Nauflette ; you are in love with Mademoiselle d'Annebault——"

"Madame, who could have told you ?"

"Oh! I warn you that I am much to be feared. When memory fails me, I guess. You are a relative of the Abbé de Chauvelin, and were refused on that account ; is not that so ? Where is your petition ?"

"Here it is, madame ; but indeed I cannot understand——"

"Why need you understand ? Rise and lay your paper on the table. I am going to answer the King's letter ; you will take him, at the same time, your request and my letter."

"But, madame, I thought I had mentioned to you——"

"You will go. You entered here on the business of the King, is not that true ? Well, then, you will enter there on the business of the Marquise de Pompadour, lady of the palace to the Queen."

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The Chevalier bowed without a word, seized with a sort of stupefaction. The world had long known how much talk, how many ruses and intrigues, the favorite had brought to bear, and what obstinacy she had shown to obtain this title, which in reality brought her nothing but a cruel affront from the Dauphin. She had longed for it for ten years ; she willed it, and she had succeeded. So M. de Vauvert, whom she did not know, although she knew of his love, pleased her as a bearer of happy news.

Immovable, standing behind her, the Chevalier watched the Marquise as she wrote, first, with all her heart,—with passion,—then with reflection, stopping, passing her hand under her little nose, delicate as amber. She grew impatient : the presence of a witness disturbed her. At last she made up her mind and drew her pen through something ; it must be owned that after all it was but a rough draft.

Opposite the Chevalier, on the other side of the table, there glittered a fine Venetian

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mirror. This timid messenger hardly dared raise his eyes. It would, however, have been difficult not to see in this mirror, over the head of the Marquise, the anxious and charming face of the new lady of the palace.

“How pretty she is !” thought he; “it is a pity that I am in love with somebody else; but Athénaïs is more beautiful, and moreover it would be on my part such a horrible disloyalty.”

“What are you talking about ?” said the Marquise. The chevalier, as was his wont, had thought aloud without knowing it. “What are you saying ?”

“I, madame ? I am waiting.”

“There; that is done,” the Marquise went on, taking another sheet of paper; but at the slight movement she had made in turning around the dressing-gown had slipped on her shoulder.

Fashion is a strange thing. Our grandmothers thought nothing of going to court in immense robes exposing almost the entire

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bosom, and it was by no means considered indecent; but they carefully hid the back of their necks, which the fine ladies of to-day expose so freely in the balcony of the opera. This is a newly invented beauty.

On the frail, white, dainty shoulder of Madame de Pompadour there was a little black mark that looked like a fly floating in milk. The Chevalier, serious as a giddy boy who is trying to keep his countenance, looked at the mark, and the Marquise, holding her pen in the air, looked at the Chevalier in the mirror.

In that mirror a rapid glance was exchanged, which meant to say on the one side, "You are charming," and on the other, "I am not sorry for it."

However, the Marquise readjusted her dressing-gown.

"You are looking at my beauty-spot?"

"I am not looking, madame; I see and I admire."

"Here is my letter; take it to the King with your petition."

The Beauty-Spot

"But, madame——"

"Well?"

"His Majesty is hunting; I have just heard the horn in the wood of Satory."

"That is true. I did not think of it. Well, to-morrow. The day after; it matters little. No, immediately. Go. You will give that to Lebel. Good-bye, monsieur. Try and remember the beauty-spot you have just seen; the King alone in the whole kingdom has seen it; and as for your friend, Chance, tell her, I beg of you, to take care and not chatter to herself so loud, as she did just now. Farewell, Chevalier."

She touched a little bell, then, lifting a flood of laces upon her sleeve, held out to the young man her bare arm. He once more bent low, and with the tips of his lips scarcely brushed the rosy nails of the Marquise. She saw no impoliteness in it,—far from it—but, perhaps, a little too much modesty.

At once the little waiting-maids reappeared (the big ones were not yet up), and, standing behind them, like a steeple in the middle of

The Beauty-Spot

a flock of sheep, the bony man, still smiling, was pointing the way.

VI

ALONE, ensconced in an old arm-chair in the back of his little room at the sign of "The Sun," the Chevalier waited the next day, then the next, and no news!

"Singular woman! Gentle and imperious, good and bad, the most frivolous of women, and the most obstinate! She has forgotten me. What misery! She is right;—she is all-powerful, and I am nothing."

He had risen, and was walking about the room.

"Nothing!—no, I am but a poor devil. How truly my father spoke! The Marquise was mocking me; that is all; while I was looking at her, it was only the reflection in that mirror, and in my eyes, of her own charms,—which are, certainly, incomparable,—that made her look so pleased! Yes,

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her eyes are small, but what grace! And Latour, before Diderot, has taken the dust from a butterfly's wing to paint her portrait. She is not very tall, but her figure is perfectly exquisite. Ah! Mademoiselle d'Annebault! Ah! my beloved friend, is it possible that I, too, should forget?"

Two or three sharp raps at the door awoke him from his grief.

"Who is there?"

The bony man, clad all in black, with a splendid pair of silk stockings, which simulated calves that were lacking, entered, and made a deep bow.

"This evening, Monsieur le Chevalier, there is to be a masked ball at the court, and Madame la Marquise sends me to say that you are invited."

"That is enough, monsieur. Many thanks."

As soon as the bony man had retired, the Chevalier ran to the bell; the same maid-servant who, three days before, had done her best to be of service to him, assisted him to

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put on the same spangled coat, striving to acquit herself even better than before.

And then, the young man took his way towards the palace, invited this time, and more quiet outwardly, but more anxious and less bold than when he had made his first steps in that, to him, still unknown world.

VII

BEWILDERED, almost as much as on the former occasion, by all the splendors of Versailles, which this evening was not empty, the Chevalier walked in the great gallery, looking on every side and doing all he could to learn why he was there ; but nobody seemed to think of accosting him. At the end of an hour he became wearied and was about to leave, when two masks, exactly alike, seated on a bench, stopped him on his way. One of them took aim at him with her finger as if with a pistol ; the other rose and went to him :

“It appears, monsieur,” said the mask,

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carelessly taking his arm, "that you are on very good terms with our Marquise."

"I beg your pardon, madame, but of whom are you speaking?"

"You know well enough."

"Not the least in the world."

"Oh! but indeed you do."

"Not at all."

"All the court knows it."

"I do not belong to the court."

"You are playing the child. I tell you it is well known!"

"That may be, madame, but I am ignorant of it."

"You are not ignorant, however, of the fact that the day before yesterday a page fell from his horse at the gate of Trianon. Were you not there by chance?"

"Yes, madame."

"Did you not help him to rise?"

"Yes, madame."

"And did not you enter the château?"

"Certainly."

"And was not a paper given to you?"

The Beauty-Spot

"Yes, madame."

"And did you not take it to the King?"

"Assuredly."

"The King was not at Trianon; he was hunting; the Marquise was alone—is not that so?"

"Yes, madame."

"She had just risen; she was scarcely clad, excepting, as it is rumored, in a wide dressing-gown."

"People whom one cannot prevent from speaking tell all that runs through their heads."

"That is all well enough, but it appears that there passed between your eyes and hers a look which did not offend her."

"What do you mean by that, madame?"

"That you did not displease her."

"I know nothing about that, and I should be distressed that such sweet and rare goodwill, which I did not expect, and which touched me to the bottom of my heart, should give occasion to any idle speeches."

"You take fire too quickly, Chevalier; one

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would think that you were challenging the whole court ; you would never succeed in killing so many people."

"But, madame, if the page fell, and if I carried his message—Allow me to ask you why I am interrogated."

The mask pressed his arm and said to him:

"Listen, monsieur."

"As much as you please, madame."

"This is what we are thinking about now: The King no longer loves the Marquise, and nobody believes that he ever loved her. She has just committed an imprudence; she has set the whole Parliament against her with her "two sous" tax, and to-day she dares attack a far greater power,—the Society of Jesuits. She will fail, but she has weapons, and, before perishing, she will defend herself."

"Well, madame, what can I do?"

"I will tell you. M. de Choiseul has half quarrelled with M. de Bernis ; neither of them is sure what it is he would like to at-

The Beauty-Spot

tempt. Bernis is going away ; Choiseul will take his place. A word from you can decide it."

"In what way, madame, pray ?"

"By allowing your story of the other day to be told."

"What earthly connection can there be between my visit, the Jesuits, and the Parliament ?"

"Write me one word and the Marquise is lost. And do not doubt that the warmest interest, the most complete gratitude——"

"I humbly beg your pardon again, madame, but in what you are asking of me there would be an act of cowardice."

"Is there any honor in politics ?"

"I now nothing of all that. Madame de Pompadour let her fan fall before me ; I picked it up ; I gave it back to her ; she thanked me ; she permitted me with that peculiar grace of hers to thank her in my turn."

"A truce to ceremonies: time flies ; my name is the Countess d'Estrades; you love

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Mademoiselle d'Annebault, my niece; do not say no, it is useless. You are seeking a cornetcy; you shall have it to-morrow, and if you care for Athénaïs you will soon be my nephew."

"Ah! madame, what excess of goodness!"

"But you must speak."

"No, madame."

"I have been told that you love that little girl."

"As much as it is possible to love; but if ever my love is to declare itself in her presence my honor must also be there."

"You are very obstinate, Chevalier! Is that your final reply?"

"It is the last, as it was the first."

"You refuse to enter the Guards? You refuse the hand of my niece?"

"Yes, madame, if that be the price."

Madame d'Estrades cast upon the Chevalier a piercing look, full of curiosity; then seeing in his face no sign of hesitation she slowly walked away, losing herself in the crowd.

The Beauty-Spot

The Chevalier, unable to make anything of this singular adventure, went and sat down in a corner of the gallery.

"What does that woman mean to do?" said he to himself. "She must be a little mad. She wishes to upset the state by means of a silly calumny, and she proposes to me that in order to merit the hand of her niece I should dishonor myself. But Athénaïs would no longer care for me, or, if she lent herself to such an intrigue, I would no longer care for her. What! Strive to harm this good Marquise, to defame her, to blacken her character. Never! no, never!"

Always intent upon his own thoughts, the Chevalier very probably would have risen and spoken aloud, but just then a small rosy finger touched him on the shoulder.

He raised his eyes and saw before him the pair of masks who had stopped him.

"You do not wish to help us a little then?" said one of the masks, disguising her voice. But although the two costumes were exactly alike, and all seemed calculated to mislead,

